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## Finding our Memberrole through Centering: What works? Merete Holm Brantbjerg

### Intro

At the SCT conference in Philadelphia in March 2015 I did a 2 hrs afternoon workshop titled: "Finding our member-role through centering. What works?" This article builds on the material explored in that workshop and the process that led me to proposing it. I describe how I have integrated my knowledge from body-oriented psychotherapy with the SCT process of centering. In this process I have looked at and undone defiant roles that sometimes get triggered in me, when centering instructions are different from my bodily experiences. I have found ways to stay in member-role while participating in SCT centering – through integrating my own approach and SCT's centering style.

Centering is presented in the SCT Foundation protocol as *"The Transition into all Systems-Centered Work"* – with the goal of becoming centered into the here- and now.

This places centering as a core aspect of Systems Centered work. No matter if we are entering a task-group or a process-group, we are challenged by the process of crossing the boundary into the context and finding our member-role. Guiding into centering is used in SCT to support this transition. We take a moment to sit comfortably, reconnect to our centered experience and gently shift our attention to the context we are entering. Centering helps us to reduce distractions and have our person energy available for working in the group in our member role.

In this article, I focus on what it is we actually do when we center. What helps when we center, and what gets in the way? And how do we deal with the fact that different members have different restraining forces to centering, so they center in different ways?

From my experience of guiding and being guided into centering in both SCT- and non-SCT groups, I've learned that there is no guiding into centering that works for everybody, Different ways of accessing a centered awareness of the body work for different members. I have also learned that we can all take up our own authority when centering. As the group leader guides us into centering, we can use or add what works for us, and let go of what doesn't work for us.

My goal with this article is to inspire this process of taking up authority when being guided or guiding into centering – by bringing possible additions to and reflections about the process of centering.

## Continue

Right at the moment while writing this, I'm sitting at the Chicago airport, waiting for my flight, I am in the process of entering my member role of writing this article.

I didn't center to begin with and now I discover that I am sitting unbalanced, with more weight on my left side. I am more aware of my head and upper body, and much less aware of my legs and trunk. I jumped into the writing process head first.

I bring myself into a balanced position, I feel my connection to the ground – and I listen to how my body regulates itself after that. Which sensations come to the foreground? I notice a relaxation in my shoulders, my breath gets freer, I sense my feet, they are tingling. I get curious about which parts of my body are more distant. I am checking on my typical low energy areas – the inside of my legs and the surface of my upper back.

Paying attention to these parts brings them more on board. I make a tiny push with the inside of my feet into the floor, and sense how energy starts moving upwards through the inside of my legs, my pelvic floor, my core, and the front side of my spine. I notice more relaxation in my shoulders and rib cage. With this relaxation, energy gets distributed to the surface of my upper back and into a horizontal widening of my breathing.

I am ready, I am here. I notice a natural balance between orienting inwards and outwards. I notice the surroundings, people in the airport, my husband next to me – and my context, with the computer on my lap. I have entered my member role with more of me on board.

This is my version of getting centered in this moment.

## Aspects we can explore and be curious about when centering

### Down-going and up-going connection through the body.

Sitting in a balanced position invites the body to get connected to the ground naturally: it supports the down-going aspect of grounding through feet and sitting bones. This process invites tension to let go. Taking in support from the ground supports the up-going part of grounding. In the centering protocol, this aspect is stimulated by following the in-breath upwards. The text in the protocol is this:

*Sit comfortably let your chair support you and feel the floor under your feet. Feel the chair under your seat- (feel your sit bones and sit on them!). Lower your eyes. Become aware of your breathing.*

*Breathe in. Follow your upper body as it rises, and your head as it floats. Breathe out. Follow your breath down, deeply into your center. Pause. Become aware of your centered experience as you pause.*

In the version I chose, I stimulated the up-going energy by pushing my feet gently into the ground.

## Modifying tension and low energy

Tension and low energy are two muscular defense patterns impacting our access to emotions and psychomotor impulses, each in their own way.

In my understanding, finding our member role through centering is supported by a light modification of both tension and low energy. If we modify the defenses more thoroughly, we are moving into work. The goal of the centering process is to modify these defenses enough to be able to put our energy behind the goal of the context we are in.

Tension and low energy work together: if you modify low energy, tension typically lets go by itself.

If you modify tension first, it can become easier to slow down enough to be able to track low energy. The risk of modifying tension first is that we can drop into our low energy states and get diffuse, tired, distant, flaccid etc, which is why undoing tension doesn't always work or last. We easily re-establish tension after a while, if we don't modify low energy too.

In my experience, there isn't a single sequence of undoing tension and low energy that works for everybody in a centering process. Everybody can experiment with what sequence works them.

That is what I did in my version at the airport: inviting a release of tension first, through getting into a balanced position – then undoing low energy on the inside and front of my body – then discovering that more tension let go – and that more low energy got modified.

Modification of tension happens through releasing energy in muscles, through letting go. Modification of low energy happens through building up energy through muscle-activation, movement, touching your body etc. – in small and gentle ways. We can shift back and forth between these two principles: play with them – become curious about what works for each of us in the moment to support our member role.

As far as I can see, the key is to acknowledge that both patterns impact our presence, and to experiment with how to include both in the process of centering.

## Vertical and horizontal breathing

A third balance is between the vertical and horizontal aspect of our breathing. In the centering protocol, the vertical aspect of breathing is stimulated – through following the up-going movement of the in-breath and the down-going movement of the out-breath.

I add another possibility here: our breathing also has a horizontal pulse – widening horizontally and gathering again.

Try this out: sense your core area (the front side of lumbar vertebrae four and five) – follow your breathing in and out, and check what it feels like to sense a horizontal

widening from your core, your rib cage and your skin on the in-breath – and a gathering around your center line, your core and your skin on the out-breath.

How is this different for you compared to following the up-going and down-going rhythm of your breath? Do the two types of awareness of your breathing support your feeling of presence and with that your member role in different ways?

My version of this is that the up-going /down-going version touches into a pattern of tension in my breathing – and focusing often increases the tension. This means that this type of guidance doesn't support me to get more centered and to find my member role. It supports my survival role of being strong in myself.

Breathing horizontally brings energy into an area in my body that is often low energized. I get more connected to myself and find my capacity to connect to others. This supports me to enter into my member role with softness.

For others, the opposite might be true: that breathing horizontally ties into a pattern of tension in their breathing, and that breathing vertically helps them get more centered. My point is not that one style of centering is right and the other wrong. Both ways build on natural aspects of our breathing.

My intention is to provide an additional possibility and with that stimulate more individual authority in members to find out what type of body awareness actually support our member role, encouraging all of us to participate in making guidance into centering work.

## Doing and being

Yet another balance that impacts the centering process is the balance between doing and being. Following instructions bodily is doing something – no matter how gently we do it. There is a conscious intention in the instructions, and instructions speak to our conscious mind.

For some people that just isn't helpful.

Members of the SCT community or from other groups sometimes come up to me and ask for support for how to center. My first response is to collect data about what works and what doesn't work for them, and then to offer additional possibilities – often possibilities of activating low energy areas in the body.

Sometimes this works – and sometimes it doesn't.

Sometimes any kind of instruction for what to notice and what to do, gets in the way of making contact with the body. Instructions can talk directly into stuck roles and deepen them instead of inviting us out of them.

Then what?

One possibility you can try out is to think of a bodily activity you like. It could be biking, running, walking, playing tennis, being in the sun, leaning up against a tree etc. Notice what happens in your body when you do that. The chance is that a bodily activity we like, holds a natural centering that can be activated by remembering the

activity. The challenge is to bring this quality to the here and now – and not to time-travel and lose contact with the context here and now.

In my centering process at the airport, I combined doing with listening to how my body regulates by itself. I started with getting myself into a balanced position – and then I shifted to listening for a while. Then I made a conscious choice of bringing energy into an area with low energy – and then I listened again to how my body regulated by itself.

For me, this style works better than following a series of instructions. Following instructions helps to keep a structure in my bodily presence. Listening to how my body regulates by itself opens up trust related to the non-verbal capacity of my body.

Like with the other balances – there is no one version that works for all of us.

Level of experience can impact the balance – if centering is new for you, instructions, suggestions for what to do and be aware of in the body can be helpful and often necessary to discover the potential in the body. On the other hand if the instructions you get don't fit your sensations they hold a dilemma.

### **Authority issues and dilemmas in centering.**

When guiding centering, we talk verbally about the body. Doing that holds a challenge. How do we find a neutral language – a language that invites orienting into factual reality?

In the psychomotor-tradition I was trained in, I learned to differentiate between the concepts of body-sensations and body-experiences. “Body-sensations” are defined as concrete bodily sensations like “My hands are hot and sweaty”, “My heart is beating slower than usual”, “I have a tingling sensation in my calves”, “I feel the contact between the chair and my sitting bones. The chair is hard. I feel a slight pain in my sitting bones.” etc.

Body-experiences are defined as emotionally loaded experiences of the body, where emotions and sensations and often also cognitive interpretations are undifferentiated. Examples of body-experiences can be: “My hands are burning”, “My heart is about to stop”, “My calves feel like a thousand ants crawling”, “The chair is pushing me” etc

Body-experience language risks to accelerate emotions without getting oriented in reality. Statements like “My hands are burning” or “My heart is about to stop” can for example easily accelerate anxiety based on negative predictions (unless you are actually facing a threatening heart condition).

The process of differentiating between body-sensations and body-experiences holds a similarity with the process in SCT of differentiating between what I actually know right now and predictions about the future. Both processes has the goal of supporting a reality-based presence in the here and now.

Another way of saying this is that body-experience language invites us further into our person-system whereas body sensation language invites us into getting oriented to the here and now which can support the transition into member role.

In a centering guiding it is a real challenge to find verbal language that stays strictly in naming concrete reality and inviting exploration of concrete reality.

An example:

In the SCT protocol it says: *Follow your upper body as it rises, and your head as it floats.*

Is this body-sensation language or body-experience? It is a fact that an upgoing movement is stimulated in the body, when we breathe in. It is also a fact that different muscular defence patterns impact how this innate potential in our breathing actually feels and works in the body. The same thing goes for what happens to the head when we breathe in. Potentially the upgoing movement of the in-breath makes the neck lengthen, which supports how the head is carried. This can give us an experience of the head becoming lighter, or floating. And it is a fact that muscular defence patterns will impact what actually happens when we breathe in and how it feels in the neck and head.

It is thus not a given that “the body rises” and that “the head floats”. The words describe potential experiential qualities we can experience when breathing in. The words can fit or not fit the experience different people are having in the centering process.

When I hear the words: “Follow your upper body as it rises and your head as it floats”, I check out if the words fit my bodily sensations and my emotional experience. If they don’t, I let them go and support my centering in a different way.

When instructions name a potential experience without clarifying that it is one possible experience out of many, it holds a dilemma. On the one hand, the instruction orients us to a potentially resourceful sensation and experience, which may support us opening up to this potential in the body.

On the other hand, the instruction tells us, what we are supposed to feel in the moment. It defines our reality by prioritizing one potential experience, which can trigger either compliance or defiance. A compliant reaction could be: “The instruction is the authority, telling me how I should feel, I do my best to feel it and when I don’t feel that way in my body, something is wrong with me. I have to try harder”. A defiant reaction could be: “Fuck off. Don’t tell me what to feel.”

I still feel a light version of the defiant voice every time I hear an instruction defining my experience. I feel an invitation into fighting about reality-perception.

When I guide centering, my solution is to look for words that guide what we can do – instead of how it feels. For example: “Push your feet gently into the floor – and notice how that activates an up-going movement in your body – potentially all the way up to your head and above it. You can add awareness of your breathing to that

– following the up-going movement on your in-breath and the down-going movement on your out-breath.”

This allows space for different flavors of experience.

I like naming different ways of doing an activation – for example: “You can make the push with the whole foot, primarily with the outside of your feet or with the inside. Do you have a preference? Choose the one that gives you access to an experience that feels supportive to your presence in this moment.”

The dilemma with this style is that it takes more time – it holds a skill training that allows you to get to know more detailed possibilities in the body. You can’t do that in a short centering instruction.

### **Orienting inwards and outwards**

In my process at the airport, a natural impulse to orient outwards emerged by itself, when my body became more balanced and filled out.

This isn’t always the case.

Focusing on body sensations for a while, which is what typically happens when we center ourselves or are guided into centering, will for some people trigger a tendency to withdraw into the body and lose the outer context. With this pattern we benefit from being guided into noticing the outer context. Other people prefer to orient to the outer context and tend to stay away from focusing on body sensations. With that pattern we benefit from being invited to stay for a while with orienting inwards.

Being in member role means being able to access information both from yourself and from the outer context – which means balancing between orienting inwards and outwards.

We have different styles and speeds in how we access this potential balance. What do we do first?

An experiment: Try out what works best for you – to orient inwards to body sensations – or to orient outwards by noticing the outer context first.

I learned from one of my trauma-clients that my typical sequence of orienting inwards first, didn’t work for her. (That is also the sequence used in the SCT protocol). The client lost contact to the here and now and dropped too deep right away, if she started by focusing inwards. For her, orienting to the here and now outer context first, worked way better.

## **What difference does it make to center? Which parts of me become available by centering and how does that impact my member role?**

Why bother with all these details about centering? What difference does it make?

The centering process in the airport slowed me down and with that I became aware of more sensations, impulses and emotions. My excitement got more grounded. I stopped hurrying to get it done – I found more acceptance of the fact that I could start the writing process but not finish it until later. Accessing my center-line – and more support in my upper back negotiated a tendency to write from a one-up position. I accessed an impulse to share what had happened in the workshop at the conference – bring it out to a bigger part of the SCT community.

Accessing a naturally balanced and centered position negotiates stuck roles and invites us into presence and freer choices. We get access to more information about ourselves and the context we are in and with that support for a reality- and curiosity-based member role.